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SUBJECT: PRT NAJAF: THE NAJAF RELIGIOUS ESTABLISHMENT IN
SHI'A POLITICS AND SOCIETY

This is a report from Provincial Reconstruction Team (PRT)
Najaf.

11. (SBU) Summary and Comment: The Shi'a religious establishment plays an important and influential role in Iraqi politics and society. Najaf is the seat of the four Shi'a grand ayatollahs, referred to as the marja'iyah ("sources of emulation" to the faithful), location of the most important Iraqi religious seminary and theology center, called the Najaf hawza, and the geographic home of the Shrine of Imam Ali (the founding religious figure in Shi'a Islam), the largest cemetery in the Shia world, and the Kufa Mosque. Najaf's theological establishment and the dichotomy in clerical circles between "quietist" and "activist" orientations affect Shi'a politics and society. Grand Ayatollah Sistani is elderly, and the next principal grand ayatollah will not have the same international name recognition and national influence. End Summary and Comment.

Historical and Theological Context

12. (SBU) Najaf was founded as the resting place of Ali, son-in-law and cousin of the Prophet Mohammed, after his assassination in Kufa, and over the centuries developed into an international city dedicated to Shi'a Islam. Many Shi'a also believe Najaf to be the final resting place of Adam and Noah. The cemetery, referred to as the Valley of Peace, became theologically important for Shi'a believers who wished to be closest to Imam Ali, Adam, and Noah for the messianic return of the Twelfth (Hidden) Imam to presage the end of time. Najaf regained its status as the most important hawza (or Shi'a center of clerical study) roughly four hundred years ago and remained the center of Shi'a doctrine until the rise of the Qom hawza in Iran following the 1979 Iranian Revolution. Hawza "graduation" is important in Shi'a Islam because of the strict study regime and rungs of theological advancement that must be achieved to gain rank. The first rank of clerical leadership cleared to interpret Islamic theology is Hojjat al-Islam. (NOTE: Muqtada al Sadr, currently studying in Qom, uses this title. END NOTE.)

13. (SBU) The grand ayatollahs, known collectively as the marja'iyah ("sources of emulation"), are designated as such by years of extraordinary Islamic moral, practical, and spiritual interpretation of such high quality and relevancy that schools of clerics and regular Shi'a believers choose to follow them as their key spiritual guides. Traditionally, one of the marja'iyah is regarded as the leading, or supreme, authority and maintains the largest base of spiritual followers. Grand Ayatollah Ali Al-Sistani currently occupies this role.

Shi'a Islam Divides into Two Camps

14. (SBU) Under Grand Ayatollah Abu Qasim al Khoei, who became

the leading Shi'a cleric in 1974, two important religious clerics named Mohammad Bakr al Sadr and Ruhullah Khomeini developed a new blend of Shi'a Islam and politics calling for "activist" religious clerics to interpret and influence all parts of life, including government, on behalf of their people. During the time of the Shah in Iran and the Baathist regime in Iraq, this type of theology inspired opposition and rebellion. While Khomeini achieved political success in Iran in 1979 and became the supreme ayatollah, Mohammad Bakr al Sadr established the original Da'wa party as the Shi'a opposition against the Baathist regime and was later imprisoned and executed by Saddam Hussein at the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War in 1980.

Qthe Iran-Iraq War in 1980.

15. (SBU) The Iran-Iraq War and the nature of Shi'a opposition to Saddam Hussein forced the Iraqi Shi'a religious establishment into two camps. The first camp, represented by the sitting marja'iyah under Grand Ayatollah Abu Qasim al Khoei and later Sistani, did not believe in violent opposition or incorporation of the religious establishment into politics and government. This camp represented peaceful, suffering opposition and the primacy of faith. Led spiritually by Mohammad Bakr al Sadr's top students, many of whom became ayatollahs, the second camp believed in a different type of ayatollah closer to the activist religious leaders of Iran and not the spiritual and scholarly marja'iyah of Najaf.

New Roles following Iraqi Liberation

16. (SBU) Operation Iraqi Freedom led to a new period for the
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religious establishment and both camps commanded numerous followers and national importance. New political opportunities inspired the Sadrist clerics, with slain Mohammad Sadiq al Sadr's youngest son Muqtada as figurehead, to flex their political muscles. Upon return to post-Saddam Iraq, most Da'wa and Supreme Council for the Islamic Revolution (SCIRI, now known as ISCI) adherents reverted back to a natural allegiance to Sistani and the Najaf marja'iyah. From 2003 - 2005, Sistani filled an important authority vacuum by voicing his recommendations and concerns in positive but vague terms. Iraqi politicians, including non-Shi'a, began to inform Sistani of major political decisions before implementation to receive a general blessing. The Shi'a alliance in the elections of 2005 used tacit approval by Sistani and the marja'iyah as the basis of their popular platform. Sistani today is one of the most well-known and influential figures in the country; even Iranian clerics and political leaders visit Najaf regularly.

The Four Marja'iyah Today

17. (SBU) Iranian-born Grand Ayatollah Ali al Sistani succeeded al Khoei in 1992 and has cemented his status in Shi'a hearts and minds as a central inspirational figure over the past seventeen turbulent years of repression, sanctions, and war. Despite his place in the quietist tradition, Sistani has never disavowed a powerful political role. Sistani believes that clerics should not be politicians themselves but does assert that the religious establishment needs to communicate important messages to the politicians. Since Iraqi provincial elections in January 2009, Sistani has emphasized a message of comprehensive, non-sectarian political parties and the need for the Shi'a power players to reach out to non-Shi'a parties for a truly national open ticket. Sistani rarely even mentions the words Shi'a or Shiites and exclusively refers to his followers as Iraqis. Sistani maintains a busy schedule receiving politicians, visiting dignitaries, and legions of scholars and pious believers at his residence within several hundred meters of the Imam Ali shrine. The Shi'a population

awaits any hint or rumor in the media associating Sistani's approval to a particular law and action.

18. (SBU) Next to Sistani, Afghan-born Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Ishaq al Fayad is the next most senior in terms of breadth of scholarly knowledge and spiritual standing. Najaf Governor Adnan al Zurfi told PRToffs that Ayatollah Sistani and his inner circle are very concerned about quality of life issues like electricity shortages, anti-corruption efforts, and the paucity of new Iraqi students entering the Najaf hawza at an early age. Punjab-born Grand Ayatollah Bashier Hussein al Najafi came to Najaf only in 1965 and is the least regarded scholar of the marja'iyah. He favors incorporation of religious schools into the national education system. Both Ishaq al Fayad and Bashier Najafi wear white turbans, indicating that they do not claim the revered blood relation to Muhammad and the line of Shi'a Imams.

19. (SBU) Grand Ayatollah Muhammad Saeed al Hakim is the only Iraqi-born of the marja'iyah and is the grandson of the late Grand Ayatollah Muhsin al Hakim and the nephew to ISCI's Abdel Aziz al Hakim. Al Hakim is deeply concerned with economic growth in Iraq and is the biggest marja'iyah supporter of the Najaf International Airport. Al Hakim and his followers have a palpable dislike of Mohammad Sadiq al Sadr and his followers, resulting in anecdotal feuds in the QSadr and his followers, resulting in anecdotal feuds in the 1990's. Al Sadr's followers reportedly heaved shoes at al Hakim when he attempted to attend the former's funeral following his execution.

110. (SBU) All four marja'iyah maintain extensive inner circles, follow issues of special concern, and inspire global followings. Sistani receives most of the political and media attention but many visitors make sure they pay special calls on all of the marja'iyah. They constantly express opinions, push for various reforms and laws, and exert influence when possible, especially through their sons and top students. All of the current marja'iyah studied under Grand Ayatollah al Khoei and are committed clerics of the quietist school. Many Sadrists of the activist school do not look to the marja'iyah for spiritual leadership and advocate for their clerics instead. Most Iraqis, however, have incorporated some version of respect for the marja'iyah into their national identity.

If Sistani Died Tomorrow

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111. (SBU) If Sistani died tomorrow, many analysts of the religious establishment tell us that a seamless transfer of authority to the next most senior grand ayatollah, Ishaq al Fayad, would take place and the addition of the next most well-known and scholarly mujtahid would join the ranks of the grand ayatollahs. Some Iraqi clerics would prefer to see Muhammad Saeed al Hakim reach the role instead because of his Iraqi heritage and status as a "sayyid" (direct descendant of the Prophet Mohammed) but others claim that al Hakim is too close to ISCI politics and therefore too politicized to take on the role of supreme grand ayatollah. While a successor would be selected, the unique status wielded by Sistani as a result of his role in the end of the Saddam Hussein regime and establishment of the new administration would not transfer as such. The next grand ayatollahs will need to nurture and expand their own base of followers.
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